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The course of Phaedra's erotic passion in Euripides' Hippolytus*

Λέξεις-κλειδιά: [Euripides](#), [Hippolytus](#), [Homer](#), [Phaedra](#), [shame-culture](#)

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In the Prologue of the play, Aphrodite states that it was her who inspired the erotic fury in Phaedra: καρδίαν κατέσχετο/ ἔρωτι δεινῶι τοῖς ἐμοῖς βουλευμασιν (27-28 “through my designing a terrible love seized her heart”). The phrase: τὰ πολλὰ δὲ πάλαι προκόψασ’ (22-23 “I have long since started most of what is to be done”) reveals the identity of what Phaedra is going through (ἔρωτι δεινῶι), and the use of the adverb πάλαι (“long since”) gives prominence to the duration of this feeling. Halleran (2000: 148) believes that the alliteration of -π- in these lines indicates the ease with which the goddess will get her revenge. Thus, it is clear that the source of Phaedra's passion is Aphrodite. Aphrodite also uncovers her motive, that is, the cause that “triggered” her revenge. According to her, Hippolytus is responsible because he is totally and reverently devoted to Artemis and accuses Aphrodite that she κακίστην δαιμόνων πεφυκέναι (13 “the vilest of the gods”).¹

Aphrodite's prologue-*rhēsis* highlights her divine φθόνος (“envy, jealousy”), which, however, was brought about by a human φθόνος, that of Hippolytus. Before Euripides, Homeric poems represent gods with human qualities (feelings of love, hatred, jealousy, sadness, etc). It is, therefore, not surprising that a goddess feels φθόνος against someone who blames her.² Staying away from sex,³ Hippolytus actually refuses an Aphrodite's quality, and by accusing her he disturbs the balance and the distance between a god and a mortal.⁴ The φθόνος of the goddess aligns with a procedure of rehabilitation and redress of the one who has been wronged (here Aphrodite).⁵

However, the causes are to be found in Phaedra's mythological past.⁶ It is known that Aphrodite cursed all generations of the god Helios because he revealed to Hephaestus her

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¹ For the use of the infinitive πεφυκέναι instead of εἶναι, see Halleran (2000: 147), who observes the πεφυκέναι emphasizes Hippolytus' hubris.

² Perysinakis (1998: 164) stresses that gods, because of their anthropomorphism, are likely to φθονεῖν their potential rivals, that is, humans, who reduce the distance between them.

³ See Conacher (1967: 27). Cf. Winnington-Ingram (2003: 202).

⁴ Thornton (1997: 17) believes that Hippolytus does not acknowledge Aphrodite's power, and so implies that he is something more than mortal; this is why Aphrodite is going to destroy him.

⁵ Cf. Perysinakis (1998: 164).

⁶ For Phaedra's genealogy, see Halleran (2000: 22-23).

intercourse with Ares. Reference to the myth is found in (338-343), where Phaedra, having a crosstalk with her Nurse, believes that her ancestry is responsible for her own misfortunes:⁷ κείθεν ἡμεῖς, οὐ νεωστί, δυστυχεῖς (343 “It was from their loves, not of recent date, that my troubles began”).⁸ Taking Phaedra’s kinship with Helios into account, it is clear that she is condemned to experience something illegitimate.

The first reference to what Phaedra is going through occurs in the play’s prologue. Euripides uses the noun νόσον (40, “disease”)⁹ to describe her passion because he wants to underline that this feeling is so illicit and strong that threatens her reputation¹⁰ at the time when δήμου φάτις (“people’s opinion”) was predominant. This term refers to the pathology of Phaedra’s erotic fury –a pathology that is about to be revealed. Moreover, the use of the participle κάκπεπληγμένη (38) gives prominence to the influence of love upon Phaedra, and the use of the passive voice absolves Phaedra from the responsibility.¹¹ The use of the adverb ἐνταῦθα (“now”), emphatically placed at the beginning of (38), the particle δὴ (“surely”), and the perfect tense,¹² denote that Phaedra’s disease is placed in the dramatic present.¹³

During the first Stasimon, the Chorus describes for the first time Phaedra’s symptoms: she is sick, sad and she does not eat: τριτάταν δέ νιν κλύω / τάνδ’ ἄβρωσίᾳ... (135-136 “I hear that this is the third day on which she has consumed no food”). Phaedra’s behavior constitutes a hubris since she seems to exceed the human limits. This voluntary starvation disturbs Aphrodite’s plan since Phaedra would die before the goddess takes her revenge.

Phaedra comes on stage in the second episode, and describes the symptoms of her illness. She realizes that she overstep the bounds and she seems to be aware of her situation, but she is not willing to put an end to her passion. She herself uses a simile, βαρύ μοι κεφαλῆς ἐπίκρανον ἔχειν (201 “how heavy is the headdress I am wearing”), with which she connects the weight caused by her emotional state with the weight of the jewelry she wears. Moreover, the phrase λέλυμαι μελέων σύνδεσμα φίλων (199 “All the strength in my limbs is gone”) hints at the adjective λυσιμελής used in terms of Love and of Sleep.¹⁴ The adjective is linked to the concept of death, and here underlines the destructive power of love.

Phaedra’s passion turns into a delirium starting with the sigh αἰᾶ (208), and then she loses control and goes into an emotional frenzy. However, she immediately realizes her situation (239) and enters the realm of logic. In describing her passion, she uses the verb ἐμάνην (“I was mad”), and the use of the first singular person indicates Phaedra’s self-consciousness. She

⁷ Phaedra seems to be aware of her mythological past. For Euripidean tragic heroes’ self-awareness of their own mythology, see Wright (2005: 133 *et seq.*).

⁸ The ancient commentator writes about (343): ἐκ τῆς καταγωγῆς τοῦ γένους δυστυχοῦμεν τὴν νόσον τοῦ ἔρωτος, ἀντὶ τοῦ. προγονικὴν τινα δυστυχίαν δυστυχοῦντες τοῦτο πάσχομεν [Schwartz (1887-1891: 46)].

⁹ Dodds (1951: 186) cites Combarieu’s (1909: 66 *et seq.*) point of view that “the primitive under the influence of strong passion considers himself as possessed, or ill, which for him is the same thing”.

¹⁰ See Halleran (2000: 47).

¹¹ For the use of passive voice, see Humbert (³1960: 107-109).

¹² For the use of ancient Greek tenses, see Schwyzler (1950: 258-266, esp. 263).

¹³ Halleran (2000: 150).

¹⁴ For instance, see *Odyssey* (20.74, and 23.342-343).

herself attributes her suffering to a non-human force, the ἄτη,¹⁵ which a god inspired, and thus, she believes she is not responsible for her passion (241). The meaning given by LSJ to the term ἄτη, that is, “bewilderment, infatuation, caused by blindness or delusion sent by the gods, mostly as the punishment of guilty rashness”¹⁶ cannot apply in Phaedra’s case since this ἄτη comes as revenge for Hippolytus’ hubris and not for Phaedra’s audacity, and as punishment for Helios’ past crime.

Moreover, Phaedra’s strong sense of shame is remarkable. More concretely, during her first appearance on stage, she uses the verb αἰδούμεθα (244 “I am ashamed”) and the phrase ἐπ’ αἰσχύνην ὄμμα τέτραπται (246 “my gaze is turned to shame”). At this point, the concept of Phaedra’s self-consciousness reoccurs as she realizes that she has exceeded the limits and she feels ashamed. All the aforementioned terms (αἰδούμεθα, ἐπ’ αἰσχύνην ὄμμα τέτραπται) remind of the “Shame-Culture” of Homeric society, where “Homeric man’s highest good is not the enjoyment of a quiet conscience, but the enjoyment of τιμή, public esteem.”¹⁷ Thus, Phaedra is not so much concerned about her conscience, but actually about the impact of her acts on her public image and about the possible deprivation of her public esteem. Phaedra’s sense of shame leads her to remain silent for about 60 lines (250-309). The verb αἰδοῦμαι and its derivatives indicate that Phaedra’s deeds are not socially acceptable in a period when δῆμου φάτις (“people’s opinion”) is prevailing. The αἰδώς functions as a deterrent, and Phaedra does not seem immodest *prima facie*.¹⁸ “The internal struggle is unabated, and the fight to overcome her passion is unequal”,¹⁹ since Phaedra is confronted with a divine power.

During the second episode, the Nurse lets us know that Phaedra does not confess the object of her erotic desire in spite of Nurse’s persistence (271 *et seq.*). Phaedra hoped that by being silent²⁰ and hiding her illness she would get out of her predicament. Nurse’s role is important since once she refers to Hippolytus’ name (310) she leads Phaedra to a very strong emotional breakdown. The mention of Hippolytus’ name hurts Phaedra, and she expresses that kind of pain and passion with the οἷμοι (“woe’s me”).

However, Phaedra avoids mentioning Hippolytus’ name maybe to protect herself from both social and theatrical outcry. If she were the first to mention the name of Hippolytus, she would immediately admit an unlawful desire that could bring about social outrage against her and she could be linked with moral decay. Additionally, Euripides might fear that, if he had Phaedra herself confess at once Hippolytus’ name, he would provoke his audience,²¹ and that either Phaedra or his play itself would be accused of being ἀπρεπές καὶ κατηγορίας ἄξιον

¹⁵ Halleran (2000: 170). Cf. Dodds (1951: 5).

¹⁶ Liddell & Scott & Jones (⁹1996: 270 s.v. ἄτη). Cf. Dodds (1951: 24).

¹⁷ Dodds (1951: 17).

¹⁸ Merkouri (1997: 325).

¹⁹ Deligiorgis (2010: 64-67). Blundell (1995: 176) considers Phaedra a victim and Hippolytus her means to revenge him.

²⁰ For the dipole “silence-speech”, see Knox (1968: 92) who states that “the choice between speech and silence [...] makes an artistic unity of the play”.

²¹ Meyrowitz (1977: 532) observes that “it is Phaedra’s unnatural passion which both horrifies and fascinates the audience”.

("improper and deservedly blamed").²² If Phaedra confessed the name of her suppressed desire, she would actually move towards her own destruction. She is concerned about maintaining an honoured reputation and a decent public image, and this is why she delays referring to her stepson's name. On the other hand, Nurse's verbal attack in (353-361) is the key-element which leads Phaedra to reveal the name of Hippolytus.²³

After announcing the name of her desire, during the second episode, Phaedra cites a monologue, on which quite a few scholars have focused. In (373 *et seq.*), she outlines the course of her passion and the efforts she has made in order to tame it. Due to sense of αἰδώς (αἰδώς τε· διισαὶ δ' εἰσίν, ἡ μὲν οὐ κακή,/ ἡ δ' ἄχθος οἴκων... 385-386) Phaedra is trying to eradicate her erotic passion. In this paper I shall not discuss the reason why Phaedra considers the αἰδώς²⁴ both good and bad.²⁵ The only thing I should point out is that αἰδώς may have a bad influence upon Phaedra because "prevents her from fighting down her love as she knows she should."²⁶ For Phaedra, the fact that she fell into this passion is not due to her lacking awareness of the moral righteousness, but because of her inability to apply the αἰδώς.²⁷ This is what happens to Medea as well in Euripides' eponymous tragedy.²⁸ This is why Phaedra declares: τὰ χρήστ' ἐπιστάμεσθα καὶ γινώσκομεν,/ οὐκ ἐκπονοῦμεν δ'...(380-381 "we understand and recognize what is good, but we do not labour to bring it to fulfilment"). The concept of Phaedra's self-consciousness reoccurs here, and she appears to be a woman who clearly understands the moral correctness (τὰ χρήστ' ἐπιστάμεσθα καὶ γινώσκομεν), and is ready to take drastic measures in order not to forfeit her honor.

Then, Phaedra herself describes the strong internal tension between keeping her passion hidden and innermost and the risk of a possible revelation:

γλώσση γὰρ οὐδὲν πιστόν, ἢ θυραῖα μὲν
φρονήματ' ἀνδρῶν νοθεύειν ἐπίσταται,
αὐτὴ δ' ὑφ' αὐτῆς πλεῖστα κέκτηται κακά (395-397).

²² *Hippolytus Stephanephorus* is the second *Hippolytus*. The first one caused severe reactions to spectators and was vigorously disapproved. The ancient commentator actually writes in tragedy's *hypothesis* about the second *Hippolytus*: "...ἔστι δὲ οὗτος Ἰππόλυτος δεύτερος <ὁ> καὶ στεφανίας προσαγορευόμενος. ἐμφαίνεται δὲ ὕστερος γεγραμμένος. τὸ γὰρ ἀπρεπὲς καὶ κατηγορίας ἄξιον ἐν τούτῳ διώρθωται τῷ δράματι" [Schwartz (1887-1891: 2)].

²³ Mills (2002: 54).

²⁴ Quite a few scholars have dealt extensively with this issue. For instance, see Dodds (1925), Kovacs (1980), Cairns (1993), Craik (1993).

²⁵ Moreover, Homer himself in *Iliad* 24.44 says that *aidos* harms and benefits. *Aidos* can be harmful when someone hesitates to avoid doing disgraceful deeds due to fear of displeasing his/her friends.

²⁶ Kovacs (1980: 288).

²⁷ Mills (2002: 39).

²⁸ Cf. *Medea* (1078-1079): καὶ μανθάνω μὲν οἷα δρᾶν μέλλω κακά,/ θυμὸς δὲ κρείσσων τῶν ἐμῶν βουλευμάτων. Medea is aware (μανθάνω) of what is socially acceptable, but her anger does not allow her to "apply" it. Cf. also Phaedra's lines οἱ μὲν ἀργίας ὕπο,/ οἱ δ' ἡδονὴν προθέντες ἀντὶ τοῦ καλοῦ/ ἄλλην τιν' (381-383 "some because we put something else, some pleasure, before virtue").

“For there’s no trusting the tongue. It can give counsel to other people’s thoughts, but when it speaks for itself, it brings abundant trouble upon us”.

The use of the term θυραῖα (395) indicates the transition from the private to the public life²⁹ since the door was the distinct partition between them, and words said out of the door acquired public dimension. Phaedra recognizes that, once she utters the name of her lust outside of her house’s door, her illicit passion is about to irrevocably take public dimensions.

The crescendo of Phaedra’s erotic illness is highlighted in the phrase καθανεῖν ἔδοξέ μοι (401), where she decides to commit suicide. Scholars argue about Phaedra’s statement. Some of them stress that she made this decision in order to salvage her honor by her own death. Others declare that this is nothing but a trick, that is, Phaedra does not reveal her real motives to her Nurse and actually blackmails her. However, this is not a trick because Phaedra feels she carries a miasma:³⁰ φρὴν δ’ ἔχει μίασμά τι (317 “a pollution stains my mind”) from which she wants to free herself at any cost and in any way, and as she is aware of the extreme power of love, she chooses the most extreme way for her deliverance, and “death can bring a kind of purity”.³¹ Additionally, Euripides himself, remembering the failure of previous Phaedra’s completely shameless presentation, attempts to refute a horizon of expectations in terms of Phaedra’s immoral image, and not to agitate again his audience.

Thereupon, Phaedra herself evaluates her passion (405-406). More concretely, she considers it shameful and sick: τὸ δ’ ἔργον ἤδη τὴν νόσον τε δυσκλεῖ (405 “the act and the sickness brought disgrace”). She uses again the term νόσος, and that νόσος makes her δυσκλεή (“inglorious, infamous”) and leads to Phaedra’s social disapproval and denigration. The adultery and the resulting defamation do not correspond to her moral code. It is important to note that Phaedra is not any longer delirious and seems to be aware of the actual situation in which she has been involved. Even her comment γυνή τε ... οὔσ’(α) .../ μίσημα πᾶσιν... (406-407 “I am a woman—an object of loathing to all men”) might reflect her previous theatrical presentation. That could be a Euripidean comment on the idea that spectators of ancient Greek tragedy had already formed about Phaedra.

Phaedra’s passion seems to be moderated when she realizes the impact of her sin on her children and husband’s honor (419-421). Once again, the public assessment hampers everything illicit and illegal. It should be noticed that the verb αἰσχύνομαι is used again in (420, ὥς μήποτ’ ἄνδρα τὸν ἐμὸν αἰσχύνασ’ ἄλῳ). Phaedra is not willing to give in to this powerful emotion, and the reason is her glory: μητρὸς οὐνεκ’ εὐκλεεῖς (423 “may their mother’s reputation allows theirs to stand high”). She believes that this illicit fury is able to deprive her children of the freedom of speech: ἀλλ’ ἐλεύθεροι/ παρρησίαι θάλλοντες... (421-422 “may they flourish as free citizens with freedom of speech”), and that the social disapproval will have a hereditary

²⁹ Cf. Sophocles’ *Electra* (518), where Clytemnestra, responding to Electra, says out: μή τοι θυραῖαν γ’ οὔσαν αἰσχύνειν φίλους. Clytemnestra accuses Electra because her lament has public character and threatens Clytemnestra’s public image. For Clytemnestra’s interest in her public image and the political connotations of Electra’s mourning, see Gasti (2003: 122, n.11).

³⁰ For the concept of miasma, see Segal (1970: 317) and the seminal book of Parker (²2001).

³¹ Cf. Gasti (1993: 28). Cf. Mitchell (1991: 97-122).

continuity to her children. It is very likely that the background of her thought lies in the Athenians' attitude that the presence of women should be as limited as possible,³² and the widespread belief that a man lacks his honour if his wife brings disgrace to their *oikos*.³³

In trying to help Phaedra, her Nurse goes the other way around. At first, she considers Aphrodite responsible for Phaedra's situation: ὀργαὶ δ' ἐς σ' ἀπέσκηψαν θεᾶς (438 "the lightning of the goddess's rage has launched itself against you"), and believes that Phaedra's passion is something normal, obscuring its exceptional quality: οὐ γὰρ περισσὸν οὐδὲν οὐδ' ἔξω λόγου/ πέπονθας... (437-438 "what you have suffered is nothing extraordinary, nothing unaccountable"). Nurse's affection for and interest in Phaedra is what explains her behavior.³⁴ On the other hand, the Nurse may fear that Aphrodite will punish Phaedra if the latter does not give in to what the goddess instilled into her, and she regards the resistance to this passion as impossible: Κύπρις γὰρ οὐ φορητὸν ἦν πολλή ρύηι, / ἢ τὸν μὲν εἶκονθ' ἡσυχῇ μετέρχεται (443-444 "no one can bear the force of Cypris when she comes in spate"). It is notable that the Nurse is designed to save Phaedra's life,³⁵ and Euripides uses the Nurse for the fulfilment of dramatic purposes, that is, as a "vehicle" to move the dramatic action forward.

While the Nurse reveals everything to Hippolytus and the latter strongly rejects Phaedra's advances, Phaedra brings up again the concept of the αἰδώς (687-688). The public dimension of her passion is now definite. She feels ashamed and she thinks she will die with a non honorable name: σὺ δ' οὐκ ἀνέσχου· τοιγὰρ οὐκέτ' εὐκλεεῖς/ θανούμεθα ("but you could not restrain yourself. And so I shall die with my good name dishonoured"). The phrase οὐκέτ' εὐκλεεῖς (687) equals to Phaedra's ultimate evaluative comment on her passion, and she uses the plural θανούμεθα instead of singular so that she gives prominence to social disapproval that will touch her children due to her deeds.

In (689-692), Phaedra fears that Hippolytus will speak and then her reputation will be widely defamed: πλησεί τε πᾶσαν γαῖαν αἰσχίστων λόγων (692 "he will...fill the whole land with most shaming words"). The λόγοι ("words") will be αἰσχιστοί because they will stain both Phaedra's and her offspring's public esteem. The reason why she is getting upset is Hippolytus' implying wording in (611-612),³⁶ in (658)³⁷ and in (660).³⁸ He seems to intend to break the oath he gave to the Nurse inside the palace to keep secret what Nurse said to him. After these hints, Phaedra feels threatened. Hippolytus' bias towards women and the very fear he causes are

³² Cf. Thucydides, 2.45.2.

³³ More concretely, see Segal (1993: 91).

³⁴ Halleran (2000: 41).

³⁵ Knox (1968: 95).

³⁶ Nurse: ὦ τέκνον, ὄρκους μηδαμῶς ἀτιμάσης ("my child, do not dishonor your oath")

Hipp.: ἡ γλῶσσ' ὁμώμοχ', ἡ δὲ φρήν ἀνώμοτος ("It was my tongue that swore. My mind took no oath").

According to Bayliss (2014: 246), "This line ... seems on first reading to advocate the breaking of an oath". Cf. Lattimore (1962: 10) who writes that "the first fatal sentence made her sure that Hippolytus would break his oath".

³⁷ Hipp.: οὐκ ἂν ποτ' ἔσχον μὴ οὐ τάδ' ἐξείπεῖν πατρί ("I would never have held back from telling my father this").

³⁸ Hipp.: ...σῖγα δ' ἔξομεν στόμα ("I shall keep my lips silent").

responsible for Phaedra's moral deterioration.³⁹ In Senecan version, pain and *dolor* affect Phaedra both physically and mentally. According to Dupont, the experienced pain triggers Phaedra's desire for revenge. She wishes to punish Hippolytus so that she regains her lost identity.⁴⁰ In Euripides, however, the disruption of Phaedra's principles⁴¹ and of the pleasure she used to experience because of the public's plaudit is what triggers her revenge. Phaedra's utterance δεῖ με δὴ καινῶν λόγων (688 "But I must make new plans") is remarkable. The term λόγος refers to the letter she will leave to Theseus, but this is due to the internal battle between the Phaedra's own nature (see 377-423) and the nature inspired by Aphrodite.⁴²

Phaedra's passion has been eliminated and replaced by her own inclination to take revenge. In (721), Phaedra announces that she will never see Theseus again. In her next utterance αἰσχροῖς ἐπ' ἔργοις οὐνεκα ψυχῆς μιᾶς (721 "After these shameful deeds—simply to save one life") it is not clear what the term ψυχῆς refers to. It is very likely that Phaedra hints at Hippolytus' life who will be punished by Theseus' curse although Phaedra does not know yet that very punishment. This ambiguity becomes explicit in (728-731) where Phaedra says that she will avenge Hippolytus. Phaedra believes she will ensure a good reputation and gain the added benefit of her current enemy's catastrophe.⁴³ ἀτὰρ κακόν γε χάτέρωι γενήσομαι/ θανοῦσ', ἵν' εἰδῇι μὴ 'πὶ τοῖς ἐμοῖς κακοῖς/ ὑψηλὸς εἶναι... (728-730 "But through my death I shall bring calamity on another too—to make him learn not to feed his arrogance on my tragedy").

At the end of the tragedy, Hippolytus lies dying on stage, and then Artemis appears acquitting Phaedra by saying γνώμη δὲ νικᾷν τὴν Κύπριν πειρωμένην/ τροφοῦ διώλετ' οὐχ ἐκοῦσα μηχαναῖς (1304-1305 "she tried to conquer Cypris by reason but suffered ruin she did not wish for through the schemes of her nurse"). Artemis credits both Aphrodite and Nurse with the responsibility of Phaedra's deeds, and gives prominence to Aphrodite's role since she declares that Theseus also ἐξηπατήθη δαίμονος βουλευμάσιν (1406 "He was misled by the goddess's design"). The fact that Euripides absolves Phaedra by having Artemis seal Aphrodite's responsibility consists a counterweight to Phaedra's shameless presentation in the first *Hippolytus*.

To sum up, in this paper I have tried to examine the course of Phaedra's erotic passion in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, and suggest that Euripides did not present a shameless Phaedra. In the play's prologue, Aphrodite announces that Phaedra will not die having lost her honorable reputation: ἡ δ' εὐκλεῆς μὲν ἀλλ' ὅμως ἀπόλλυται / Φαίδρα.⁴⁴ It seems that this Phaedra is not the woman of Euripides' first *Hippolytus*.⁴⁵

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³⁹ Reckford (1974: 307-328).

⁴⁰ Dupont (2003: 229-230).

⁴¹ Kovacs (1987: 71).

⁴² For the distinction between the two natures, see Lattimore (1962: 10-11).

⁴³ Reckford (1974: 316, 325).

⁴⁴ According to Fergusson (1984: 48), there is an irony in the term εὐκλεῆς since εὐκλεία was identified with Artemis.

⁴⁵ Cf. Reckford (1974: 307).

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present the evolutionary course of Phaedra's erotic passion for her stepson, Hippolytus, in Euripides' eponymous tragedy. Another point that is also discussed is the formation of that passion by other dramatic persons, especially the Nurse and Hippolytus.

